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ENG 302: Literary Critique

Native American Folklore

In a global world, it almost seems eminent to understand the cultures of the world. How different people act, taking into consideration customs and beliefs. Trying hard not to offend, and yet it seems that one culture we have pushed aside and forgotten about is in our own country. Native Americans, although having rights, are given some of the worst lands, and the worst schooling. Often never given opportunities to leave their reservation, many result in Alcohol or drug abuse. According to a statistic from *msnbc.com* one out of every ten Native American males will die before the age of forty from a alcohol related illness. But in today's age of enlightenment, this has to be getting better right? People are writing about acceptance, and making it their goal to teach our children about the diversity of culture and pleading to help people. But after looking over some of the Native American children's books, I find that the assumed enlightenment is far from here. Within this paper I will be examining five different children's books all with Native American folk lore theme. I will be assessing each books written value, its visual value, and how effective it could be to use in the classroom.

The first book that I will introduce is titled *Coyote and the Fire Stick,* written by Barbara Goldin and illustrated by Will Hillenbrand. This story is said to be from the Pacific Northwest, never actually indicating a tribe or nation. The story begins in a time where people did not posses fire, but could be seen on a mountain top guarded by three evil spirits. Coyote, mentioned in this book as a singular spirit, comes to the helpless tribes aid and promises to gather the fire from the three evil spirits and give it to the people. After collaborating with other animals and sprits, the Coyote spirit sneaks into the camp of the Three evil Spirits and captures part of the fire. The spirits peruse the fox, who once caught throws it to Deer, which then gets passes to Squirrel, who passes it to Frog, and who finally throws it into the mouth of the Tree spirit that clamps down upon the fire. After the three evil spirits fail to pry the fire from the tree spirit, and are certain that no human will either, they leave the Fox and Tree sprits and journey back up the mountain. Fox knowing the secrete of how to get the fire our of the tree, shows the people to rub two sticks together on dry leave to make fire.

The praise for this book right away comes from the authors admittance to this being only a compilation of several different telling, not a direct lore. Although she does not mention which tribes these particular variations were taken from, she does mention that all of the legends derived from the Pacific Northwest. I found a copy of one of the versions of this tale at the website *ewebtribe.com*. This tale has similar elements such as the Coyote being the clever mastermind, and fire being reserved to only select spirits. However this version never mentioned anything about the Indian people. Instead the Coyote was bringing fire to the world because he thought it would be better for the animals to use.

It is in this fact that the Indian people are actually included in this book that makes me dislike it. Not for the fact of cultural awareness, but instead because of the helplessness that they portray all Native American people to be. Not only do the words of the book show the Native American tribes as incapable of invention, but the illustrations show them as Neanderthals, often being portrayed with dumbfounded looks or fear. Illustrations throughout the book suggesting traits about the characters, such as the Squirrel being very sleigh and agile or Coyote spirit being portrayed smiling, laughing, and often thinking. However the people, from the beginning to the end, have very confused and perplexed looks. I really doubt that it was the intent of either the author or the illustrator to portray such a thing, but the overall feeling of the book is that Native Americans are incapable of inventing things, and they need the spirits to retrieve things for them. I don't believe that this book is really something that teachers should use to teach Native American folk lore. It is not because the story is inaccurate, rather there are many different stories out there that both show Native lore, and promote the honor of the given tribe. One positive side to teaching this book however, is the great example of team work. The fact that Fox alone did not try to accomplish the given task shows that sometimes team work is needed to invent something great.

The second book that I will introduce is entitled *How Turtle's Back was Cracked* by Gale Ross, illustrated by Murv Jacob. This takes its claim as an old Cherokee legend of how the turtle came to receive his back markings by taking credit for something that did not belong to him. It begins with Turtle and Opossum sharing some berries together, when a wolf comes and steals some of the berries from Turtle. The entire time of which Turtle remains oblivious. Opossum kills the wolf for being a thief, but Turtle takes the credit for the mighty kill. Soon other wolves begin to seek revenge for their brother and capture turtle, who is boasting the kill, and throw him off a cliff. After falling a long distance, the once smooth and shinny shell of turtle hits a rock and cracks into several pieces. He heals himself up, but never does his shell return to its original smooth states.

Like the first book, this author too admits that this is only a very skeletal form of the original tale. However it is nice to know that according the authors bio on *kennedy-center.org* She is a professional storyteller in the modern day Cherokee tribe. Although this does not necessarily authenticate it, allot of this book does show similarities to other Cherokee nation tales such as *The Great Ball Game* and *How Rabbit Tricked Otter*. I also have to say that I really enjoy the illustrations and text bordering done in this book. The pictures really seem to capture the life that is all around without over personifying the objects. For instance on page 9 and 10 of this book, you can really see life in the sky through the paintings. Vivid colors and swirl patterns make it pop and be active, without giving it a silly smiling face and eyes. Finally this book portrays a very clear moral of both not bragging and not taking credit for what is not yours. This morel is not actually preached, nor mentioned in a completely clear way, but instead learned in an obvious tone by turtle throughout the whole book.

Although I really do think highly of this book, and do consider using this in my own classroom, I have one major criticism. That is the second hidden message of bullying and revenge. On page three of the story, when a wolf begins to steel some of the berries, the opossum does not turn to kind tactics to rid the wolf, but instead kills him. When the other wolves find out about this act on page 13 and 14, they form up a gang and both kidnap and try to kill turtle. Nowhere in this story is forgiveness, and nowhere in this story is a level head. It seems that although a good moral is learned in turtle surviving, a bad one is learned in the rash decision on the part of both opossum and the wolves. Like the other texts I need to look at this and understand that in this particular culture, revenge may not be as looked down upon as in ours. However in my own opinion those issues are at least something that needs to be brought up in a home or classroom after reading the book.

Next is entitled *Storm Maker's Tipi*, written and illustrated by Paul Goble. The story follows two specific Blackfoot tribesmen, one of which is the chieftain of the village name Sacred Otter. Sacred Otter, takes his son on his first hunting trip, and both of them get caught up in a big storm before they can find shelter. As sacred Otter wanders, looking for his now lost son, He stumbles upon the Storm Makers tipi, who shows Sacred Otter a very special way to make his home, so that it will project him and his people from future storms.

From as far as I was able to research, the story of the *Storm Maker Tipi* is an actual story that goes by the more common title of Sacred Otter, and it does in some form or another relate back to the original Blackfoot tribe, just as the author suggests. This tale is illustrated in a very simplistic way, almost as though it is being painted by Indians on their hide tipi's. Looking over the art, it seems to not help or hinder the mood of the piece. It seems instead to almost capture the idea of a person telling this story, rather than the actual events of the story. I also like how the author used not only paintings to help the story along, but incorporated several modern pictures into the last few pages. This informs the young readers that this tribe, although much smaller, is still alive and thriving. It is the only book thus far that really shows that Native American cultures are still alive today.

Apart from that I feel that this book does play allot into the standard stereo of Indians in the 1800's. Before the actual story starts, and a little after the story as well, there are several pages of activities where children can build miniature tipi's, and little poems about how the gods gave Indians tipi's to live in. The book never mentions any other form of living that Native Americans chose. No wigwams, longhouses, or lodges. Also the concept of horses as being part of the tribe since the beginning is misconception considering that Westerners were the first people to introduce horses to North America. In no way would I recommend this book, despite having cultural ties to an actual Blackfoot lore. There is no moral choice being made (except the negative one at the end when Sacred Otter steals the White man's horses) and there are no real teaching purposes to this book. Even if you did decide to do a lesson on Native American lodging, there are much more accurate and usable books out there.

*The Bone Man* is a tale told by Laura Simms and illustrated by Michael McCurdy that tells of the bravery of one young boy, and how it spanned to create the entire Modoc tribe. This gothic themed book starts some time after a great disaster caused by a spirit name the Bone Man and follows a very young Native American boy and his grandmother. The Grandmother tells the grandson a prophecy that he will one day save his people and return water to the land by killing the Bone Man. One day while collecting berries for them both to eat, the little boy stumbles upon the sleeping giant Bone Man. After much trickery and bravery on the boys part, he slay the giant and throw his thundering heart into the sky.

The Dark deep colors and the vivid brush strokes immediately brought me into this book. Michael McCurdy did a fantastic job not only catching the story, but the emotion of all of the characters as well. I could easily see how some children may not like this books art for its dark and gloomy colors. However I found that the colors really gave something extra to the story that it would not have otherwise. Another thing that I truly enjoyed about this book is the way that the Modoc Tribe is portrayed. In All of the other four books, the Indian nations are portrayed as helpless and in need of the spirits to teach them things for survival. In this tale however, it was the bravery of this boy who saved the people. I feel like this gives a completely contrasting look compared to the other books as far as the bravery and courage of Native American tribes. With this lays an even greater message of being brave in today's culture too. My favorite line in the book has the little boy talking to his Grandmother " "Grandmother, I am afraid." Said Nulwee. She smiled "A good warrior knows he is afraid and goes forward." (Simms 1998)" Although today it does not have the same implication as it may have in the time of actual warriors, to me it still holds a true message. That although the journey may be tough, and people may not like y, do what you know is right.

I can honestly say that the only thing that I found critical about this book would actually be the same thing that I enjoyed; its gothic illustrations and plot. The actual text is written at a third grade level, having very simple words (except for Native American names) and not really exploring odd customs or traditions that the children may not know about. However the darker plot and illustration may seem too intense for third graders. I can only say this from personal opinion and experience, however I find that few children actually enjoy something this intense to read for themselves at third grade. However as a classroom read and discuss, I would defiantly consider this book a probability.

The final children's book is called *When God Made the Dakotas*, written by Tim Kessler and illustrated by Paul Morin. This is a creation story that is told by the Dakota tribe about how their nations land came to be. It begins with the last place on earth that is void of creation, and the medicine man Woksap waiting for the creator to come. Once there Woksap asks the creator to make his land just like the other nations. Filled with trees, mountains, streams, and lakes. But in all of his request the creator says that he has no more ability to make any of that, so instead Woksap asks the creator to make what he sees fit. At this request the creator uses his own personal belongings to create the Dakotas, such as his hair feathers to make geese, medicine bag to make Buffalo, and his peace pipe to make the majestic clouds.

This book makes me beyond sad from the very beginning, because it is simply not true. I looked up several different creation stories from the Sioux Nation, which is where the Dakota tribe branched from, as well as Dakota creation lore. None of what I found matched in any way. Below are some links to of the other creation stories that I found.

http://www.sioux-indians.com/sioux-history.htm

http://www.crystalinks.com/sioux.html

http://www.bluecloud.org/32.html

on top of the falsification, I found that hints of Christian creation stories sprinkled throughout. A blatant would be the idea that the world and everything is governed by a singular god. Not in any native American lore have I ever heard of that being so. As a matter of fact most native American tribes were considered Animists, meaning that they believed everything had a spirit, and everything participates together. Secondly, and most blatant, is the scattered text that is taken from Christian text. The very last words on the very last page are "And it was good." which is taken from the creation poem in Genesis. It could be a coincidence for sure, however the compilation that this story does not match any account of the Dakota creation account, I don't think that it is farfetched to think that the author may have sprinkled some other religious influence into the text.

It does sadden me to think that so much could be made up for this book, because the illustration and moral implication is just so great. Each page is covered in beautiful earthy watercolor tones of greens, browns, and yellows. Each page creates a new brush stroke to a previously empty land. Much like it did in the book *How the Turtle's Back was Cracked*, the strokes add so much emotion to the story, that otherwise would never be. Outside of the art, the moral that Woksap learns about loving what he has is so worth wile. He starts by wanting things that his brothers in the north and south have, but finds that where he truly finds beauty and happiness is not in what others have, but in what you have. And finally the text itself has some very helpful elements to new learners such as repetitive phrases and ideas. To someone learning to read, the pictures help the words, and the composition of the words help the reader. Overall I do not think that I would recommend this for a teacher or parent to read, although if a child decides to read it independently that would be ok. The fact that it is actually a false story, and worse off the fact that it gives a false Monotheistic twist on another persons culture makes it hard for me to edify teaching this to children.

The overall feel that I got for most of these books was quite lackluster . With the exception of *The Bone Man* every one of the books portrayed Native Americans as a helpless backwards people. In *Coyote and the Fire Stick*, it was the Coyote spirit that had to help, In *Storm Makers Tipi*, it was the storm god who had to assist them. Again with the exception of *The Bone Man*, Native Americans are also portrayed as just accepting how their life is. This, although I am sure never intentional, plays off of the same 1900's "education" of the "savages" that we should be trying our best to get away from. Although these are legends of the people, the authors have inadvertently suggested that Native Americans have been and are still somewhat uneducated and "savage. When we teach these Native cultures in our class room, we must keep in mind that these were and are not miss informed people, nor are they a lost civilization. But a living breathing people, to whom we should show great respect and equality.

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